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TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB684
Correctional Services - Prerelease Unit for Women - Facilities and Services
(Gender-Responsive Prerelease Act)

TO: Chair Smith, Vice Chair Waldstreicher, and members of the Judicial Proceedings Committee

FROM: Toby Ditz

I am Toby Ditz, and I live in Baltimore City in District 40. This testimony is in support of SB684.

The proposition that there should be a women’s pre-release facility with transition programs designed for women should not be controversial. Gender equity is at stake. I was on a tour of the Maryland Correctional Institution for Women (MCIW) two years ago and was very surprised to learn that so few resources were devoted to women’s transition programs compared to men’s. As a university teacher who worked for years to try to advance gender equity at my workplace, I had assumed, perhaps naively, that equitable treatment of men and women in the state prison system would at least be the working principle. Yet men’s pre-release programs receive the lion’s share of resources, while women are neglected. That men have multiple freestanding pre-release facilities, and women do not have even one is a stark example. It is unsafe, and it is just wrong.

People who know the prison system in Maryland better than I do say that men are advantaged partly because of economies of scale. Because there are so many more incarcerated men than women, a new program for men stretches a dollar further than a comparable program for women. From the vantage point of budgeting, it is an understandable temptation to focus on men. But, again, it is unjust and the expense of women’s recidivism when we inadequately prepare them to transition back into society must also be considered.

Cutting corners on the needs of women in transition is also upside down from the perspective of family policy. Over the last several decades two-parent households have declined sharply in all ethnic and racial groups, and women are still primarily responsible for the daily care of children. This is especially true among lower income families. As a result, incarcerated women are providers and caregivers for children at three times the rate of incarcerated men. When mothers and grandmothers are in prison, the effects on the family are immediate and often devastating, as when children are placed in foster care.

One size cannot fit all when it comes to pre-release transition programs and facilities. Women need programs designed for them, not programs that were originally set up for men. Women need programs that will help them care for children who have been traumatized by their

absence. Housing programs are especially important because women with children may face greater obstacles to getting suitable housing than men without resident children. And for some women, successful reentry will depend on learning how to avoid domestic abuse situations. Transition policies must be gender sensitive.

A pre-release unit for women that offers programming tailored to women's needs is in accord with the principle of gender justice, and it will enhance the well-being of families and children. **I respectfully urge a favorable report on SB684.**